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## OLD ENGLISH BALLADS IN THE SCHOOL

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The editor of this journal has laid before me some interesting passages from a lecture on the teaching of English, given to the students of Bedford College, a part of London University, by Mr. C. Linklater Thomson. With regard to the suitability of popular ballads for instruction and reading in schools, these quotations from Mr. Thomson sound a discouraging note. He thinks it "a waste of time" to teach such a poem as "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury," a favorite in English schools. He condemns the Robin Hood ballads, not only because the moral of them is bad, involving "some trick played by the outlaws," but also because their style is "inferior to that of the Scottish poems." This inferiority in style, he declares, holds good of nearly all the English traditional, popular ballads, and they are rejected in block; while what Mr. Thomson calls the Scottish poems are praised for that "magic" in their style which is palpably absent from versions south of the Tweed.

It is true that not much can be said in defense of the moral teaching involved in the ballad of "King John and the Abbot of Canterbury." It is true that monk and sheriff fare very ill at the hands of Robin Hood, though I doubt heartily that the story, so capitally well told, could do boys and girls any harm. It is true that Scottish traditional ballads have here and there a quality—"magic" may pass as name for it—seldom found in English versions.

There is a feast in your father's house—  
*The broom blooms bonnie and so is it fair;*  
It becomes you and me to be very douce—  
*And we'll never gang up to the broom nae mair.*

But to concede the truth of these observations must not mean concession of what seems to be Mr. Thomson's main point; neither morality in matter nor "magic" in style, as Mr. Thomson has

handled them, can control our decision about the suitability of popular ballads for use in the school. The question of morality should lead at once to ground which his instances do not cover and hardly touch; the question of style depends upon a far more important pedagogical principle. In the present paper I should like to take that higher ethical ground, discuss the deeper principle, and justify the ways of the ballad by a more general test.

The educational value of the ballads in certain respects is obvious. They have simplicity—real and not imitated simplicity; and one need not strain the argument of ontogenesis to show that this survival in form and spirit from the world's childhood of storytelling suits the individual child of today. Ballads make the direct appeal; they are full of repetition at the critical moments, which exactly answers to the child's demand; and they leap over tiresome and "realistic" details. They have no figurative phrases to puzzle and divert attention, little or no metaphor. In Professor Steenstrup's fine phrase, they "talk as a mother to her child." Their rhythm is exact, insistent, memorable. It would indeed be a waste of time to dwell on these features which have tempted so many poets to imitate the popular ballad, and which commend it even to the most careless reader. My main point is that the objectionable features, as Mr. Thomson sees them, point to deeper levels of advantage. When Mr. Thomson deplores a certain disregard of morality in the outlaw-ballads, although he may be right in the particular instance, he fails to note that the great body of ballads, while perfectly "moral" in tone, leave this general question of morality out of the account—a commendable omission when children are in the case. Furthermore, when Mr. Thomson rejects English ballads because they lack "magic" in their style, he fails to note what this means for his main question, what compensating advantages the lack of "magic" may have for young readers. "Magic" is an appeal to emotional experience; in the child's case it is a suggestion, an appeal not to experience, but to imagination and anticipation of experience—a questionable matter. "Magic," too, may be an appeal to reflection, and mainly, as Shelley has noted, to sad reflection. Longfellow, whom one now abuses so unreasonably, both practiced this lyric art and told the secret of it;

the mood it engendered must "resemble sorrow only as the mist resembles the rain." But are children better for this mist and hint of sorrow? Between the immortal nonsense of

Hickory, dickory, dock,  
The mouse ran up the clock,

which, to be sure, has simplicity, lilt, and epic interest, but lacks profundity, completeness, and coherence, and the beautiful lines of Blake—

O sunflower, weary of time!

which sing that pleasing sorrow into the heart, there is safe middle ground—the best popular ballads. They are utterly removed from nonsense; they are utterly unsentimental and unreflective. The ballad of popular tradition does not ask general questions about the evil in our life, the misery of men, the riddle of the painful earth. The ballad does not—save in those exceptional "magic" passages of Scottish lays, mainly amorous, which have already been cited—call up the vague sentiment of love and loss, or practice the "natural" magic, as Matthew Arnold termed it, of lines like these:

In such a night  
Stood Dido with a willow in her hand  
Upon the wild sea banks and waft her love  
To come again to Carthage. . . .

Our best and noblest lyric is forever asking those deep questions in terms of this "magic." I should, therefore, like to take away from the reading of children all poems, however high their poetic rank, however simple and convincing their phrase, which stimulate that kind of reflection and appeal to that kind of sentiment; and I should like to put into their places a few carefully selected popular ballads, both for the positive reason that the ballad is singable, objective, simple, energetic, direct in appeal, and for the negative reason that it is unreflective and unsentimental. For children, in a word, the best poetry can be too good.

The process of reform in school reading has been salutary in the main. The principle of selection, excellent in and for itself, has been to form in young children a taste for the noblest and best literature. Nor did one fail to meet the evident objection of

forcing intellectual appreciation. No piece hard to understand, or involving high questions in philosophy, was put into the child's "reader." Tragedy, of course, was left out—murder, crime, the sordid and the hopeless, the note of despair. But, in a sort of compensation, sentiment was left in—sentiment up and down the scale; not amorous sentiment, to be sure, but the kind that is really decocted from reflection upon the tragedy so carefully excluded in its objective and visible guise, sentiment founded on the misery and baffling fates of man. Now, there are few bad influences upon children so subtle and yet so effective as the forcing of childish sentiment. Boys and girls should never be asked to feel by deputy the sentiment of baffled life, to be led before their time over the tragic path, and so be made to anticipate the loss of their own innocent and eager outlook. No lyric is simpler, none more poignant and true, than Mignon's prayer,

Vor Kummer altert' ich zu frühe;  
Macht mich auf ewig wieder jung. . . .

but no child ought to appreciate it. Even Blake's *Songs of Innocence* need sifting. Let us have the *Tiger*, to be sure; but let us have no tears over childhood's tears. To sentiment of their own kind children are entitled; but it ought to be in solution with narrative and pictures, with out-of-door verse, which appeals by its echo of bustle and action, its rhythm, its call to keep step, its fresh, pictorial triumph, its deep color and clear-cut forms.

The ballads, I grant, are full of dire and tragic happenings. So are the soundest nursery-rhymes; so are fairy-tales, folk-tales, earliest epic. But they are not full of dire and tragic sentiment. Death stalks through the nursery with fearful foot, and every playground has its heaps of imaginary slain; but there is no reflection over the causes and the necessity of the ogre's or the witch's cruel deeds, no sentiment over their own destruction, no tears over fate. In the child's mind can be found something of primitive man's attitude toward death. The mere tragic event does not trouble the child, who would as unwillingly accept an account of the world in terms of general beneficence as he would accept an account of it as a mere vale of sorrows and tears. It is a place of action, movement, color; he desires to see it plainly, to see it over and over

again. Sentiment, "magic" of appeal, can only blur this picture and disturb the young spectator, who, if left to himself, will make no mistake in the labels and will delight in the rough justice of events. Poetic excellence for the child must be obvious and not suggested; and hence not even in the style of a poem is "magic" to be desired.

The traditional ballads meet such needs of the child for his poetic reading. I could instance some very "safe" examples; but I shall rather take a case which seems at first sight to bristle with difficulties. I take "Johnie Cock," called by Mr. Child a "precious specimen of the unspoiled traditional ballad." Johnie may or may not be an outlaw of the extreme type; but he disregards the warning of his mother, hunts the king's deer, and, in defending himself from the attack of the seven foresters, kills them "all but one," while he is sorely wounded himself. He sends a bird to his mother, to tell her of his case and to bid her have him carried home. There is not a touch of sentiment or reflection; but the rough, "working" virtues are there—courage, sympathy of kin, scorn for cowardice and treachery. The wind blows through these verses, the sun shines on them, all is "real"—and yet all is of the primitive world, the child's world of folk-lore and fairy-tale. Wolves are cited as authority on the code of honor in fight; "a little bird" carries tidings.

Through such a medium as this, let children see that strenuous and dangerous and tragic side of life which cannot be hidden from them, but which has no sinister and mournful meaning when so presented. It is infinitely worse to suppress the picture and suggest the sentiment, to evoke an untimely sadness, as so many of the best lyrics do when brought before the child's imaginative vision.